

Information on Hepatitis C Infection



What is hepatitis C infection?

It's an inflammation (swelling) of the liver caused by hepatitis C viruses. Some people with hepatitis C are infected for a short time and then recover. However, most people infected with hepatitis C remain infected for life. Long-term hepatitis C infection can lead to serious liver damage and even death.

What are the symptoms hepatitis C?

Most people have no symptoms of hepatitis C. If a person does become ill, symptoms of hepatitis can include nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, abdominal discomfort, fatigue, dark urine, and jaundice, (yellow skin and eyes).

What does a positive hepatitis C test result mean?

The hepatitis C **antibody test** detects the presence of antibodies, which the body develops in response to hepatitis C infection. Hepatitis C antibodies can be detected in almost everyone who is infected by 6 months after exposure. A positive test can mean:

- that a person has a short-term infection. In other words, they were recently infected and they still have hepatitis C viruses in their body;
- that a person has a long-term infection. In other words, they were infected years ago and they still have hepatitis C viruses in their body;
- that the infection has resolved. In other words, the person was infected in the past, but the hepatitis C viruses are not in their body now; or
- that a person's test result was incorrect.

The **only** way that a person with a positive antibody test can know if he/she is **currently** infected is to have a follow-up evaluation and blood test with a doctor. Central District Health Department does not have doctors on staff and does not provide follow-up testing. A positive **nucleic acid or polymerase chain reaction (PCR)** test would indicate that a person is currently infected with hepatitis C.

How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C viruses are primarily spread through blood. People are at risk for infection if they:

- share an infected person's needles or other drug injection equipment;
- had a blood transfusion before 1990 (since May of 1990 all blood donated in the United States has been screened for hepatitis C);
- are in frequent contact with human blood;
- use an infected person's razor, toothbrush, or other items that could become contaminated with blood.

Others who **may** be at risk are:

- anyone who has sex with an infected person without using a condom;
- infants born to infected mothers.
- anyone who shares items used for "snorting" cocaine.

Hepatitis C is **not** spread by coughing or sneezing, a handshake or hug, sitting next to an infected person, or by sharing an infected person's food or drink.

When do the first signs of illness occur?

Remember, most people have no symptoms of hepatitis C. If someone does become ill, his/her symptoms will appear two weeks to six months (average is 6-9 weeks) after being infected.

How can hepatitis C be prevented?

- A person with a positive hepatitis C antibody test should consider him/herself to be infected and able to spread it to others unless a doctor determines that he/she is not infected.
- A person with hepatitis C should not donate blood, blood products, organs, tissue, or semen.
- Do not share needles or drug injection equipment (including cocaine snorting implements), razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, or other items that can become contaminated with blood.
- A person with hepatitis C should cover all cuts and lesions.
- For persons with more than one sex partner, using a condom correctly and every time significantly reduces the spread of sexually transmitted diseases including hepatitis C.
- For persons in a **monogamous relationship** (only one, steady sex partner) no changes in sexual practices are recommended at this time. Unless there are other risk factors for hepatitis C infection, the sexual partner of an infected person does not need to be tested.

Note: In order to prevent additional liver damage, it's recommended that persons infected with hepatitis C receive the **hepatitis A** and **hepatitis B** vaccines if they have not already been immunized or have not been infected with those viruses in the past.

Resources for Additional Information

- **Hepatitis Support Group** ➤ Meets in the Board Room at St. Alphonsus Regional Medical Center, 1055 N. Curtis in Boise, every third Tuesday, 7:00-8:30 p.m. The contact person is Chickee Helms, phone 208-382-6400. **Website** <http://www.hepatitis-central.com/HCV/support/id/.boise.html>.
- **American Liver Foundation** ➤ Toll Free 1-800-223-0179. **Website** <http://www.liverfoundation.org>.
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** ➤
Website <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/index.htm>.
Toll Free Hepatitis Hot Line 1-888-443-7232.

If you have questions, please call your doctor or local health department.

Central District Health Department
707 N. Armstrong Place
Boise, ID 83704
208-327-8625

Valley County Office
703 N. First Street
McCall, ID 83638
208-634-7194

Elmore County Office
520 E. 8th Street N.
Mountain Home, ID 83647
208-587-4407